

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE **A3**

NEW YORK TIMES
19 May 1987

Reagan's Contra-Aid Line: New Shift

J By JOEL BRINKLEY
Special to The New York Times

WASHINGTON, May 18 — President Reagan's new assertion that he was "very definitely involved" in the covert program to aid the Nicaraguan rebels is only the latest in a string of White House reversals on the question.

For the last several months Mr. Reagan and his aides have professed to know little about the private aid to the rebels, known as contras. "I had no detailed information," Mr. Reagan said when asked about covert military aid to the contras just two weeks ago.

Since then, Congressional testimony has demonstrated that Mr. Reagan knew far more than he had been saying, and on Friday Mr. Reagan did an about-face. "I've known what's going on there, as a matter of fact, for quite a long time now, a matter of years," he said, adding that private aid to the contras "was my idea to begin with."

A study of the record shows that during most of the period starting in 1984 when Government assistance to the contras was restricted the White House issued unambiguous denials of any involvement, almost always accompanied by promises that the President and his aides were carefully abiding by the letter and the spirit of the law.

Actions Called Legal

But each time evidence has been presented showing that the Administra-

tion had in fact been aiding the contras in one manner or another, the White House has shifted its ground, saying it was perfectly legal.

The latest reversal of the White House position has effectively short-circuited a central theme of investigation in the special Congressional Iran-contra hearings that began early this month and resume on Tuesday.

Behind almost every line of inquiry at the hearings so far has been the general question: What did the President

He now admits he was deeply involved.

know, and when did he know it? Now Mr. Reagan has said, in effect, that he knew all about it from the very outset.

That development is likely to make any further questioning on this theme anti-climactic.

Focus Shifts to Prosecutor

Mr. Reagan's assertion that he did not violate the law, even though he was heavily involved, because the law did not apply to him, also moves the focus of the investigation away from the public hearings, where the purpose is to find out what happened, to the special prosecutor, whose job is to determine if the actions were legal.

Through 1984 and most of 1985, the Administration steadfastly denied any involvement with programs to aid the contras. A statement by John Hughes, the State Department spokesman, in late 1984 was typical. He said private individuals were entitled to help the contras if they wanted, but he added: "Obviously there was consideration of options or alternatives in the Government, but the decision was taken not to play an active role in soliciting either private funding or third-country support. And the fact is, the United States has not done that."

The Administration maintained that position until August 1985, when news reports showed that Lieut. Col. Oliver L. North had been directly involved in raising money for the contras and offering them tactical assistance during the period when Government assistance was the most severely restricted.

Then the White House did its first about-face. Larry Speakes, the White House spokesman at that time, said: "The President was fully aware of the extent of the relationship between N.S.C. members and members of the democratic resistance group, and he has been aware all along." Asked about that then, the President said: "We're not violating any laws."

Link to Plane Denied

The issue came back to the forefront of public attention again last October, when one of the private contra supply

planes managed by Colonel North and Richard V. Secord crashed inside Nicaragua. Then, officials from almost every branch of Government went to great lengths to deny any Government connection to the plane.

"Absolutely not," Mr. Reagan said when asked if there was any United States involvement. "While they're American citizens" on the plane, he said, "there is no Government connection with it at all."

Then for the first time the President used the argument that the White House maintained until Mr. Reagan changed his stance again on Friday. "We've been aware that there are private groups and private citizens that have been trying to help the contras," he said, "but we did not know the exact particulars of what they're doing."

But on Friday, Mr. Reagan said "I was kept briefed" on the private aid program, adding, "It was my idea."

Diversion of Profits

Today both Administration and Congressional officials said the new White House position does leave one area where the facts remain unresolved: the question of whether Mr. Reagan was aware that profits from the Iran arms sales were among the funds that went to the contras. Mr. Reagan continues to maintain that he did not know.

Mr. Secord, the former Air Force major general who was the chief operative behind both the Iran arms sales and the contra supply network, said two weeks ago that only \$3.5 million from the Iran arms sales was diverted to the contras.

Many members of the Congressional investigating committees have said they are less concerned by the diversion than by the larger picture: that the Administration set up an elaborate, foreign policy apparatus to carry out covert programs that the Congress was unwilling to accept.

But from the moment the Iran-contra arms deals swelled from a problem to a scandal last November, Mr. Reagan has pinned his defense on not knowing about the diversion. That promoted the diversion issue to one of great significance.